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Petticoat in the Navy: My Mother's War

Sheila A. Murphy

Abstract

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Petticoat in the Navy: My Mother's War

"Petticoats in the Navy! Damn'd outrage? Helluva mess! Back to sea f'r me."

—legal advisor to the Secretary of the Navy, 1917

by Sheila A. Murphy

In 1918 Julia Lehan, age nineteen,
lives in Roxbury, works downtown where
Boston streets swarm with servicemen,
storefronts are papered with recruiting posters,
air echoes with newsboy cries of doom:
Lusitania, the *Somme*, *Ypres*, *Verdun*.

The Navy is building ships, enrolling women,
Yeomen (F) the label for this new class.
Navy Secretary Daniels vows
women's pay will equal that of *Yeomen*
who will soon be sent across the sea
to make the world safe for democracy.

America enters the war and so does Julia,
USNR in gold on grosgrain ribbon
circling her broad-brimmed dark straw hat,
brass buttons gleaming on the Norfolk jacket
of her new navy blue uniform
with flared skirt and high-button shoes.

She will live at home, her widowed mother
grateful for the living allowance, the Navy
grateful for Julia's skills—bookkeeping, typing,
and shorthand—useful at the Custom House
and later at the Charlestown Navy Yard.

In her official portrait, faded now,
Julia's serenity and bashful smile
mask whatever hopes and fears led her
to choose to serve her country in
the war to end all wars.



*Julia B. Lehan, Yeoman (F) 2c,
1st Naval District, Boston, 1918*